



Van Lunen Fellows Final Paper
Internal and External Marketing
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Introduction

In March 2014 as a part of my annual review Covenant's school board asked me to increase the visibility of Covenant Christian School within the St. Louis metropolitan area. Essentially, I was asked to do a better job marketing our school outside of our immediate community.

It was perceived by some of our school families that Covenant was not a "real" school because it was not more visible. For example, families would see information about other schools in local publications or through social media but they would not see Covenant.

Covenant has been a successful school. Purposefully small, Covenant has usually filled its classrooms and, at times, has been over capacity. For these reasons I have generally found no real need to market the school because word of mouth seemed to be enough to keep us full.

Of course, this perspective is shortsighted. But in a world where the "tyranny of the urgent" wins, marketing our school was not a huge priority. So, the board asked me to do a better job in this area and, because the world of marketing is changing so quickly (do we invest in print? social media? Christian radio?), I was unsure as to how to proceed with *effectively* marketing our school.

My Van Lunen project was to develop a comprehensive internal and external marketing plan for the school. This plan was to be based on sound research that would take into account Covenant's unique vision, resources and location.

What Was Accomplished

The primary goal of this project was the development and implementation of a marketing plan that would be both internally and externally focused. This plan was developed in September 2014 and in October presented to the school board.

The plan, which for the most part was implemented, met with mixed results. These results I will share along the way.

Updated Website

A major component of our new marketing plan was a major overhaul of our school's website (ccsstl.org). The old website may have been one of the most horrible sites on the web. The previous site had been developed internally a number of years ago and lacked good photos and quality information for families that might be interested in the school. In addition, the site was simply unattractive. In January, Covenant engaged a local web development company, Muv, to create the new site. They did a good job for us as they provided a site of which we could be proud. While primarily focused externally, the new site is attractive and was well received by our community.

Another benefit of the new site is that it is easily updatable. One of my goals for this summer is to teach our Administrative Assistant and Assistant Head of School how to manage the site. At present, I am the only one who can do so.

The timing on this project was a major miss. One of the most important aspects of the new site is marketing externally and if we were looking to engage prospective families with the site it should have been up (at the latest) by the end of last summer. The new site did not go up until this past March. Part of the delay was financial, needing to wait until we were confident we could manage the site development fee, but the primary delay was simply that we (I) were not aggressive enough in moving forward on this project.

Pelican Peek's

A major marketing initiative for us this year was the development of "Pelican Peek." We made it known in our community that this was an opportunity for families to stop by during the course of the school day to meet with school's staff and to view the school "in action." This was not intended to be a full tour of the school and was not too time consuming for staff.

This year, the school held 6 Pelican Peek's and they were attended by a total of about 12 families.

These Pelican Peek's met with mixed success. We had some Peek's where no one attended. While others would draw 3-4 visitors.

My concern with our overall admissions plan and the Pelican Peek's in particular is that we are creating too many layers for families to enter into the school. My sense is that we are missing opportunities to more fully engage prospective families because we have too many steps in the process. While staff want to continue to do Pelican Peek's next year, I am not yet convinced that this is the best use of our time and resources. I think I would rather just get families in the door and have a conversation with them.

Facebook Presence

Covenant's Facebook presence was substantially upgraded during this past school year. The school engaged a parent as a paid employ to update our Facebook page at least twice per week. The site, on average, was updated nearly three times per week and we received an extremely positive response to this part of the plan. In the world of Facebook, "likes" are important, and our "likes" have more than doubled over the course of the last school year. Real time updates to Facebook are important and this was achieved and upcoming events were advertised through posts.

In addition, Facebook was used as a means for providing our families as well as prospective families with a more well-rounded understanding of the school. Covenant has a reputation for



Covenant's new website features more photographs, an attractive home page and information for prospective families.



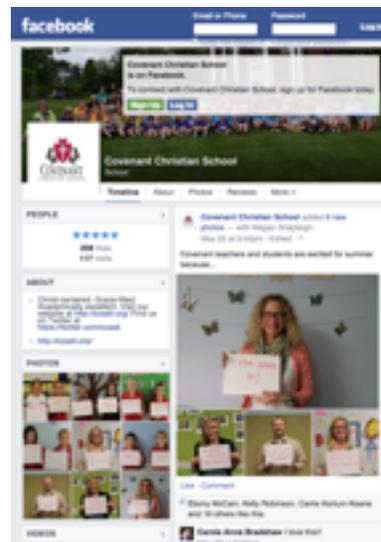
Pelican Peek's were new to Covenant and yielded mixed results.

being “outdoorsy” and that is something that we embrace because that is a distinctive for us. However, having an outdoors element to our school is not all that we are and we need to combat that perspective as well. So, Facebook was used to help provide a broader understanding of what was happening in the school, with Facebook posts being thoughtfully considered to ensure balance.

Facebook Marketing

A late addition to our school’s marketing plan was the implementation of Facebook marketing. We did an advertising campaign in late March and April through Facebook that encouraged families to look at Covenant’s website. The add popped up more than 7,000 times in a targeted marketing effort that resulted in 156 separate hits on our website at a total cost to the school of \$104. This, from all appearances, is a very cost effective means of advertising. But how effective was it for us?

Again, with the limited knowledge we have available, I would point to this as an endeavor with mixed results. Although I believe that it created greater awareness of the school in our targeted communities, as of this writing we are unaware of anyone who has visited the school based on this marketing effort. At the same time, this advertising was done in March and April and was too late for many families that might otherwise have considered Covenant. In the future we will do more Facebook advertising at more appropriate times.



Covenant has effectively engaged Facebook as an internal and external marketing tool.

Joint Marketing

Covenant partnered with the other Christian Schools Association of St. Louis (CSASL) schools to conduct marketing this past fall in various publications in the St. Louis region. This was a new step for the school. The marketing pushed families to the CSASL website (csasl.org). We know that several families contacted us through that site but we do not know if they became aware of the site through the CSASL advertising or through other means.

Books for Kindergarten and Younger Visitors

A part of our plan was to give books to children who visit our school for grades Kindergarten and younger. We did not implement this this year but plan to do so next year.

Special Promotion Science Classroom

Covenant opened its new science classroom in February. In order to promote the space, we held several open houses for school families during the week and we opened the building for church members for one Sunday.

A big miss in this was the opportunity to gain greater publicity from the space. It is unique in that it is a standalone building that is located in the heart of our school’s outdoor classroom space. The interior was specially designed to promote student creativity. This was missed primarily due to not lining someone up to lead the effort.

Special Promotion with Baker Creek

Toward the end of the school year we did a special promotion with one of our community partners, Baker Creek Heirloom Seeds of Mansfield, Missouri. Each September Covenant’s

sixth grade students travel to Mansfield as a part of their sixth grade retreat. (Mansfield is also where Laura Ingalls Wilder wrote her books.) While at Baker Creek our students learn about starting a business and differences in seeds (heirlooms and hybrids). They also pick out their seeds for the World War II Victory Garden that they plant in the spring.

This year we invited Quintin Eason, the chef from Baker Creek, to come to Covenant for two days to work with our students and to do a workshop for parents and others in our community on using produce from the garden. While we are excited about doing this again next year, this year's outreach was very lightly attended. This is one of those events that we were not completely sure how it was going to go and, when it was finished, we reflected on opportunities lost.



Quintin Eason from Baker Creek Heirloom Seeds working with Covenant students to prepare a meal for the Christian Schools Association of St. Louis's Heads of Schools.

Hallways

Late last summer a small team of folks walked the halls of the school to determine how we might make the school a more warm and inviting place. In order to accomplish this goal, changes were made in several areas: picture placement, bulletin boards and hallway storage.

First, we placed framed pictures of students engaged in various activities throughout the school. A lesson from this first year is that we need to change out the pictures (or at least move them around) on a regular basis to attract ongoing attention. This is especially true in that we have young church families that walk these halls on Sunday mornings.

Second, we developed guidelines for each class' hallway bulletin board. In particular, teachers were notified that bulletin boards were to be changed out on a monthly basis (unless there are extenuating circumstances). To some degree this may seem onerous, but to support our teachers in this we provided them with ideas and a person who could help them physically with their bulletin board space development.

Third, while not the most glamorous thing we could have done, we made a concerted effort to clean out the school's hallways of storage. Because our space is small and crowded, we often use every nook and cranny for "stuff." While in the past we sought to make the storage look attractive, no matter how you fancy it up it is still going to be storage. So, we made arrangements for the school to use a bedroom in one of the church's houses for storage and moved everything out of the hallways.

Church Narthex

The school is a ministry of Covenant Presbyterian Church. The church is fairly traditional, with a "fancy" narthex that does not usually lend itself to the marketing of church ministries. Working with the senior pastor, we were able to develop marketing space that was sensitively designed that could be shared with other ministries. While the school was slated to use the space only about half the time, it is better than nothing. I am planning to meet with the senior pastor in early June to ask that we develop a second, similar space so that the school may have a permanent narthex presence.

School Partnerships

For the first time ever, Covenant will be partnering with Westminster Christian Academy's Camp Westminster program. Our new science classroom was designed so that it could accommodate hands-on summer programming opportunities that would include woodworking, working with small engines, electricity, etc. In particular, this year we will be running a Westminster camp at Covenant. This is the first time Westminster has partnered with a school in this way and we are excited to have the Junior Engineering camp at Covenant in June. I will be working with a Westminster teacher (and Covenant dad) to lead the camp.

What Was Learned

First, and most importantly, through this process I learned that there are a wide variety of ways that schools have available to them to effectively market their schools. All of the areas discussed in this paper are ways schools may choose to market and I am sure that other effective means are available.

Second, that it is not enough to gather all these methods and throw them against a wall and hope one (or two...) of them stick. Each marketing method should be examined and implemented with particular goals in mind and, importantly, the resources to make this method effective. While I don't know that we gathered them up and threw them against a wall, I do think we could have been more intentional in how these methods were implemented. For example, it would have been good if at the beginning of the school year (or, better yet, last summer) we simply "bit the bullet" and paid for the new website. What a difference that site has made for us!

What Difference Is It Making

Internally the marketing efforts have been well received. In particular, our Facebook, website and narthex efforts have been appreciated.

Externally, we are probably looking at a "too little, too late" scenario. Covenant's enrollment for the 2015-2016 school year has decreased considerably from the just completed year. This past school year Covenant enrolled a full school of 155 students. As of this writing enrollment for next year has dropped to 135. While I think we will be about 140 going into next year, it is disappointing. It is especially disappointing because our decrease in enrollment is primarily found in our preschool program and this could be an issue for years to come.

Why did this happen? Our decrease in enrollment primarily seems to have arisen for three reasons. First, demographics has played a major role in this issue as we have not enrolled as many siblings of current students as we have in the past. Second, we are losing a lot of Covenant Seminary families either to graduation or to the public schools. Third, we were unsuccessful in attracting many new families.

While there is still some internal debate about our overall lack of success in attracting new families, I am leaning toward a revised admissions procedure with too many steps as a key problem. We have made it increasingly difficult for new families to enter the school. So, this will be a focus for next year.

I'm usually a glass half-full kind of guy, so as we look to the future I'm hopeful that the steps we have taken this year will pay dividends in the future.